

More generally, it is a good idea if you check out the access issues you may run into before you become completely committed to one particular research topic.

Methods for researching

When choosing a research topic, it makes sense to think about the methods you will use to collect and analyse data as soon as possible. If you have a choice, consider the methods you will enjoy using or not. For example, if you like talking to people, you might be well advised to make use of interview methods. If you don't like talking to people, on the other hand, you might think about undertaking library or archive-based research. And if you like carrying out statistical or multivariate analyses, you might consider a more quantitative methodology.

The methods you use are a key part of your research, so you need to understand something of the alternatives available to you, and their strengths and weaknesses.

See Chapter 3, **Thinking about methods**, for a discussion of the main kinds of research methods you might use.

If you enjoy or have a flair for a particular method, this can make your research project more interesting, and help to motivate you to carry it through. Or you might like to use your research project to learn about, or develop your skills in, methods you are not familiar with.

□ What to do if you can't think of a topic

It may be, of course, that you are committed to doing a piece of research, but you just can't think of what to do. This is quite a common problem, and may be associated with your confidence, or lack of it, in undertaking a research project. This section is designed to help you address this problem. It may also help you if you have already thought of a topic, but wish to refine it a bit or consider some alternatives to it; or if you have too many ideas as to what you might research.

This section considers ten suggestions for helping you to brainstorm your ideas for a research project (see Box 11). You should then be in a better position to make a selection and begin to refine your choice down to a workable project.

Ask your supervisor, manager, friends, colleagues, customers, clients or mother

You could usefully ask almost anyone for ideas; non-specialists and those who aren't involved, as well as experts and those who are.

Box 11: Ten ways to think of a research topic

- 1 Ask your supervisor, manager, friends, colleagues, customers, clients or mother.
- 2 Look at previous research work.
- 3 Develop some of your previous research, or your practice at work.
- 4 Relate it to your other interests.
- 5 Think of a title.
- 6 Start from a quote that engages you.
- 7 Follow your hunches.
- 8 Draw yourself a picture or a diagram.
- 9 Just start anywhere.
- 10 But be prepared to change direction.

Your supervisor may have a good deal of advice to offer, and might welcome you researching a topic of interest to them. Or your supervisor might put you in touch with a colleague in a similar position. Similarly, your manager and colleagues at work may have ideas for research which would be of value to your organization. Or your friends and neighbours might have suggestions for research which could help your local community in some way. Talking about your ideas to people who aren't involved with research can be very revealing and helpful.

Look at previous research work

This is another obvious suggestion, and one which we have already made in the previous section.

I was desperate for an idea, any idea, so I began by asking around. Surely someone out there in practice would have an exciting question that they felt must be asked but not the knowledge or resources to pursue... When it became obvious that no one was going to present a research question to me on a plate I began my search in earnest. I read a lot and went through back copies of journals. I particularly chose the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* and the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* to look through because these were very general in their content, were academic in nature and very often researchers would mention 'implications for further research' at the end of their paper. After leafing through several journals I came across an article about creativity and nursing.

(Miles 1994: 18–19)

There are almost certainly many examples of similar kinds of research projects which you could look at, whether these are presented in the form of published articles or as research reports or theses. You might consider replicating one of these: using the same methods to analyse the same problem, but in a different area or institution. This can be very useful and illuminating, whether you confirm, add to or cast doubt upon the earlier findings.

See the section in Chapter 1 on **What is original?** if you are worried that developing your project from previous research work is insufficiently original.

Develop some of your previous research, or your practice at work

You may already have done a piece of small-scale research, or perhaps just researched a particular field of study for an essay or shorter paper. Think about whether it would be possible and interesting to develop this line of thought further. Or, alternatively, you might choose to research a topic which was engaging your attention, and demanding your time, at work. Your own *curiosity* and *desire to learn* is an excellent place to start.

Relate it to your other interests

You will probably have a range of interests outside of your work or course of study. These might include, for example, family, social, voluntary, community or sporting activities. It is quite possible, depending upon the limitations on the subject area for your research, that you could link your research to one of these interests. Thus, if you are carrying out management research, you might base it, at least partly, on a voluntary or community group you do some work for.

Think of a title

You may find that thinking of possible titles for research suggests topics of interest to you. After all, a lot of the initial attraction in a book, television programme or film resides in the title. It may be punning, alliterative and/or pithy. It might pose a key research question in a succinct fashion, or suggest a new area for research. For example:

- Training Matters.
- The Empire Strikes Back.
- Women's Ways of Knowing.
- Images of Organization.

Titles need to be as short as possible. Try to think of some you like that will motivate you. A good title should help you to focus your subsequent work.

However, don't feel that you have to keep to the title you originally thought of: the time may come when you need to change it.

Start from a quote that engages you

Another approach is to extract from the literature you have read one or more quotations which really engage your attention. We are talking here about the kind of statements which draw a strong positive or negative reaction; which

make you think that the author really knows their stuff, or, alternatively, doesn't know what they are talking about. These quotations may be comments, interpretations of research data, questions or assertions. They may even directly identify areas needing further research.

Follow your hunches

You may have a strong instinctive feeling that a particular area or issue needs researching, or will raise interesting questions. This may be because of a critical incident you have experienced. Or it may be that something about it surprises or puzzles you, or just doesn't seem quite right. Don't be afraid to follow such hunches and see where they lead. But, as with all the suggestions given here, don't expend too much time and energy on them if it appears they are not getting you anywhere.

Draw yourself a picture or diagram

Producing a spider diagram of issues, interests, questions and their possible interconnections is a standard brainstorming technique. It can be undertaken individually or in a group. It might help you to identify or isolate particular areas for research, and suggest how these are related to your general subject area. You might then wish to share your diagram with others, to get their responses and suggestions. An example of such a diagram is given in Box 12.

As an alternative to the spider diagram, depending on your interests and skills, you might draw a picture or a map. The choice is really up to you. The idea is simply to get you thinking about possible areas or questions for research, their relationships and relevance.

Just start anywhere

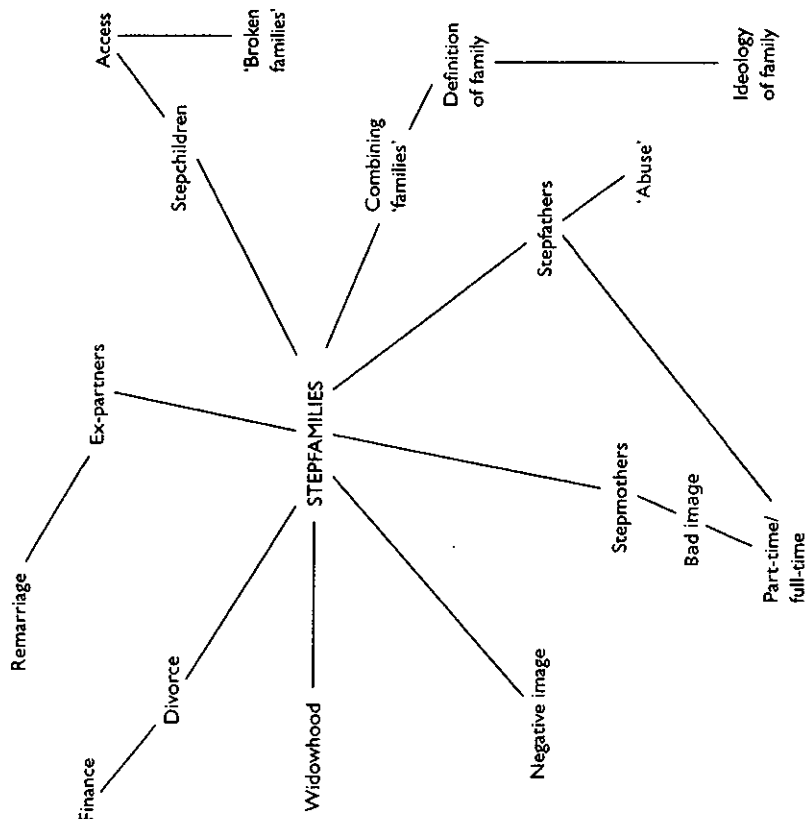
Finally, if none of the above engages or appeals to you, you could just start anywhere. Go away and read something, or talk to someone, about some of the issues relevant to your general subject area. Sketch out and begin a research project, any research project of about the right size, even if it feels dull and routine at first. Something better is likely to come out of this activity, perhaps something completely different.

Be prepared to change direction

This may become necessary if you are denied access to important people or documents, if insufficient people respond to your questions, if you cannot find the data you thought was there, if you change job or move house, if you get bored or for other reasons. Having some in-built flexibility in your research plans – thoughts about alternative approaches to the same question, or about different directions away from your starting point – is a very good idea.

you will use in your research and refining your research design. Indeed, many research projects are not finally focused until the data collection and analysis process is well advanced.

Box 12: A spider diagram of research interests and relations



Remember:

- change can be positive;
- it is OK to change;
- lots of people change their research project or focus;
- you always end up at a different place from where you thought you were going anyway.

☐ Focusing

Once you have chosen a topic, or perhaps a number of possible alternative topics, you will almost certainly then need to refine it and focus it. Focusing is not an instantaneous process, but takes place over time. During this period you will probably be doing a lot of background reading, thinking about the methods

You may find that working through some of the ideas in Chapter 4. Reading for research helps you to focus your research topic.

You will need to focus your project to ensure that it is relevant to your needs, and to any regulations or expectations you are operating under. Above all, focusing is almost invariably necessary to produce a project that is feasible within the time, space, costs and other practical constraints affecting you. Whatever your chosen research method, you will probably find it useful to address the questions set out by Mason (1996) to help you focus down from your initial idea or ideas to an achievable project (see Box 13).

For further help in developing your research framework see the section on Which method is best? in Chapter 3.

Box 13: Five important focusing questions

Working from a qualitative research perspective, Mason (1996: 11–18) suggests there are five sets of difficult questions that you need to work through in order to find out what is the essence of your inquiry. These are:

- 1 What is the nature of the phenomena, entities or social 'reality' which I wish to investigate? For example, are you interested in social actors or behaviours, in feelings, in memories, in policy, in organizational practices?
- 2 What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social 'reality' which I wish to investigate? For example, what would count as evidence of organizational practices?
- 3 What topic or broad substantive area is the research concerned with? What would be the generic label for your research?
- 4 What is the intellectual puzzle? What do I wish to explain? What are my research questions? For example, are you interested in how something works or how and why something has developed? Mason suggests three common intellectual puzzles: (a) developmental puzzles, i.e. how and why did X come about; (b) mechanical puzzles, i.e. how does X work; (c) causal puzzles, i.e. what influence does X have on Y?
- 5 What is the purpose of my research? What am I doing it for? Mason indicates that this question requires us to consider the political and ethical issues of our research.

Exercise 9: Your research questions

Write down up to four key questions which your research project seeks to address. Begin each one with a questioning word like how, who, what, when or why.

1
2
3
4

Which of these questions is the most important or central to your research?

Identifying your research questions or hypotheses

An obvious starting point for focusing is to try to set out, loosely at first and then more precisely, the questions you want to answer in your research project. If it suits you, you might express these as hypotheses which you will then seek to prove or disprove. But for most people, straightforward questions will probably be fine. You might like to try Exercise 9 at this point, to see how well you can identify your research questions.

In a small-scale research project you are unlikely to be able to handle more than two or three main research questions. You may only have one, and it might actually be defined for you already. If you have four or more, you should probably be thinking of cutting them down in number and just focusing on a few.

If, or when, you get your research questions right, they should suggest not just the field for study, but also the methods for carrying out the research and the kind of analysis required. If they don't, they are probably pitched at too general a level. Research questions are like objectives, rather than aims: they should contain within themselves the means for assessing their achievement. Box 14 uses two examples to illustrate what is involved in refining your research questions.

Defining the key concepts, issues and contexts

Defining the key concepts, issues and contexts of your research project should also assist you in focusing your work, as well as being of great help to you later on in your project. They define the territory for your research, indicate the literature you need to consult and suggest the methods and theories you might apply. The nature and meaning of concepts, issues and contexts are explored in Box 15.

Do you already know what the concepts, issues and contexts relating to your research project are? Try Exercise 10.

Using the doughnut and jam roly-poly models of research

Researchers, particularly those with limited experience, often approach their chosen research topic with considerable enthusiasm, reading widely, checking

Box 14: Refining research questions

In one case, a student stated that she wanted to do 'something on NVQs' (i.e. National Vocational Qualifications). In the second, the researcher was interested in the 'politics of development'.

Both of these cases, particularly the second, are clearly unfocused and unmanageable subjects for small-scale research. They are the stuff of lifetimes of scholarship or extensive team research. To focus them down to something manageable, issues like the following need to be addressed:

- What NVQ subject areas might I examine? Will I focus on particular institutions or classes? Am I concerned with a given time period? From whose perspective might I examine NVQs: that of the policy-maker, educator, student or funder?
- Am I interested in development in a particular country or area? Over what period of time? Am I talking about economic, political, social or technological development? What level of political analysis am I concerned with: local, regional, national, international or what?

By addressing these kinds of issues, the proposed research project can be refined down in size and appropriate research questions developed. Thus, in the case of 'something on NVQs', the basic question might be:

- How successfully have the NVQs in Accounting been introduced within two colleges of further education in Somerset?

Or, in the case of the 'politics of development', the main research question might be:

- What public subsidies have been attracted to a village in rural France over a ten-year period, and how have these been used?

Exercise 10: Concepts, issues and contexts

Concepts: What are the main concepts of your research? How are they to be defined or operationalized?

Issues: Draw a map indicating the key areas of debate that are relevant to your particular research concerns.

Contexts: Draw up a genealogy of the key thinkers in your research field to indicate the development of theories, perspectives or methods.

sources and contacting experts as appropriate. But their focus can be almost exclusively upon the topic itself, rather narrowly defined, with little reference to how it relates to the broader field of research and study within which it is set. Their desire to explore thoroughly their growing interests in specific areas has to be reconciled with the need for each research project to be focused and

Box 15: Concepts, issues and contexts

Concepts: Dey (1993: 275) defines the term concept as 'a general idea which stands for a class of objects'. Concepts are 'umbrella' terms. For example, the concept of class refers both to the classification of people according to, say, income or employment, and to judgements that we might make about others (or of course ourselves). Examples of concepts include truth, beauty, evil, time, hunger, love, destiny, ethnicity, gender, class and space. In quantitative research it is very important to define the meanings of your key concepts in advance in order to measure them systematically. This requires you to be clear about the indicators that you are going to use that will stand in for the concept. For example, if your research is concerned with poverty you might define poverty in terms of income or benefit groups, housing size and so forth. For some qualitative researchers, generating conceptual categories at the analysis stage will be much more common, because such researchers are interested in the perceptions of their respondents. This does not, however, mean that if you are planning to conduct qualitative research you need give no initial thought to defining concepts. You still need to be explicit and aware of how you are defining concepts in the research questions that you formulate, and in the observations and interviews you conduct. The way you define concepts will shape the data you collect.

Issues: These refer to the broad questions that underlie and direct disciplines, sub-disciplines or subject areas, as well as public affairs. They are the subject of continuing debate and study from a range of perspectives. Examples of issues include the links between educational participation and economic development, the effects of television programmes on people's behaviour and the relationship between road building and traffic congestion. It is often the case in small-scale research, particularly for undergraduate or MA projects, that the focus on a particular issue leads to a neglect of the wider disciplinary and sub-disciplinary issues and theories.

Context: This relates to the background of existing research, knowledge and understanding that informs new and ongoing research projects. Research seldom, if ever, breaks wholly new ground. It builds on an extensive history of other people's work. You will need to have some familiarity with this if you are to make the most of your own research work. Your work might, for example, ask similar questions, replicate a study in another area or seek to modify existing findings. Your research context will include many studies that are not specifically relevant to your particular research questions, but are illustrative of broader issues in your disciplinary field, applications of your methodological approach or comparative studies in other countries.

contextualized within a more general framework. Some examples of this tendency are discussed in Box 16.

We would argue that a balanced research project should consist of a detailed study set within, and linked to, an understanding of the broader context of the subject field. It is possible to put rough proportions on this balance. Thus, while the bulk of the time available for the research, say 70–80 per cent, will usually

Box 16: All focus and no context

- Edward wanted to examine the impact that fitness training might have on his colleagues. He believed that if they all undertook such training, their performance on the job would be improved, there would be less absenteeism, long-term sickness and early retirement, with consequent improvements in cost-effectiveness for the organisation.

- Audrey wanted to look at the incidence of post-traumatic stress among her colleagues, the consequences for their work and the implications for their training. As her organization was an emergency service, her expectation was that most of those questioned would have suffered such stress, though they might feel under pressure to minimize or deny it. She believed that pre-training was necessary to help people to cope with the stresses they would have to face in their work.

- Tessa wanted to understand the processes involved in decision-making within organizations. Her concern was with learning how employees could be kept sufficiently up to date with developments in their job area. She believed that new practices should be introduced to facilitate this.

In each of these three cases, the students initially chose far too big a field to research and write up successfully in a year of spare-time commitment. Their ambitions had to be gradually pared down during the research study period. In each case, the students' focus was almost exclusively upon the topic itself, rather narrowly defined, with little reference to how it related to the broader field of training and human resource development which they were studying.

Thus, Edward became very concerned with measures of human fitness, alternative fitness regimes and the practices of comparable professional organizations in other countries. Audrey concentrated on measures of stress, critical incidents and their effects, and alternative counselling approaches. And Tessa focused on different organizational models and systems, and the psychology of decision-making.

be devoted to the specific research question or questions, a substantial chunk, 20–30 per cent, would be spent on the contextual issues and connections. A similar proportioning would probably apply in writing up the research.

The allocation and organization of space in writing up your research is discussed in the section on How to argue in Chapter 8

We have called this balance of context and focus the doughnut model of research (we are referring here to the British jam doughnut rather than the American ring doughnut: see Hughes and Tight 1996). It is illustrated in Box 17.

In practice, however, novice and small-scale researchers often tend towards two other patterns. Both of these over-focus on the details of the particular research project being undertaken. In one pattern, the positions of the study and

Box 17: Doughnuts and jam roly-polys

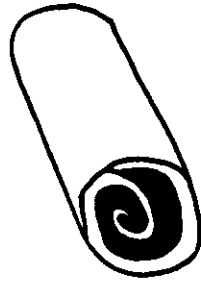
The doughnut



The inverted doughnut



The jam surprise



The jam roly-poly

its context are reversed, so that limited reference to the wider field is found embedded within the details of the research. In the other pattern, often presented as an initial response to criticism, the detailed study is placed within its context, but the latter is far too thinly presented. We call these two patterns the inverted doughnut, clearly a structure which could not sustain itself, and the jam surprise, something rather sickly and only to be eaten if lots of tissues are available.

There is a danger, of course, in over-extending the use of any metaphor; and the image of the doughnut may also seem rather too simplistic. We have already argued that it is more realistic to present the research process as a spiral, which is cyclical, can be entered at almost any point, is a never-ending process, will cause you to reconsider your practice and will return you to a different starting place.

See the section in Chapter 1 on **What is research?**, particularly Box 6.

The doughnut provides a static image, a beginning or end point, and does not convey much about the process of research. As such, while it offers a good starting point for using metaphors in this context, it needs further development. Hence the jam roly-poly or Swiss roll.

This alternative image expresses the continual interleaving of context and specifics, as well as the multiple possibilities for interconnections between them. Thus, the jam roly-poly can be sliced at any point to give a stratified mixture of jam and pastry, or, by analogy, research data and theory or context. These relationships hold throughout the length of the jam roly-poly, suggesting

Exercise 11: Metaphors of the research process

Do the metaphors of the doughnut and the jam roly-poly bear any relation to your thinking about your own research? And what about the research spiral?

Are there other metaphors which you can think of, or which you prefer? Are these metaphors visual? If so, you might care to draw an illustration.

We would like to hear from you if you have thought of a good metaphor!

a thematic approach to research, running from beginning to end. And the image allows for different conceptualizations: there could be different proportions of jam and roly-poly, different flavours of jam and different colourings used.

If you like the idea of using metaphors to explore the research process, try Exercise 11.

Sketching a research outline or proposal

Another technique which should help you to focus your research ideas is to try to sketch out a proposal or outline of your research project and plans. This may well be required of you if you are studying for a degree, or if you need to get the approval of your manager for your project. It will be essential if you are trying to get some funding from somewhere to support your research.

You may already have drafted your research questions, and have a good idea of the key concepts, issues and contexts involved, but do you have a clear notion of what the whole project might look like? Can you sketch out a summary of how your eventual research report, dissertation or thesis might be organized? This is the theme of Exercise 12.

A parallel approach is to draft a schedule for the research work itself. Knowing you will have only so much time in which to do the work, sketch out what you will be doing, month by month or week by week, in order to achieve your ends. Remember to leave yourself some flexibility and some 'free time', to allow for when things don't go exactly as planned.

This approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, in the section on **Mapping your project**.

These exercises should help you to highlight just how realistic your proposals actually are. Look at your proposed chapter or section contents, and at your monthly or weekly plans. Do you really think you will be able to squeeze that much into the time and space available?